

THE CLEE HILLS TRIAL 2023 by Simon Lewis Car 77 Class 90

As we charged through section 1, Harton Wood, keeping up the momentum as usual, I heard a plaintive "bloody hell!" from the passenger seat. Shelsley Walsh commentator Graham H Jones was making his debut in trials as my passenger for the day and finding the event rather more 'extreme' in nature than he was expecting! The Clee was my debut trial back in 2019 with my daughter Charlotte, then 12, alongside in the Gas Monkey X-90. We loved every moment. Four years on, Charlotte, now at 6th form, has landed a part-time job as a waitress in a local Inn. Sadly, that has curtailed her motor sport somewhat, Sunday lunch service coinciding, as it does, with the majority of ACTC events. So, Graham, who I have known for many years, kindly stepped in for this event. Previously he'd only watched VSCC trials and was anticipating something a little more genteel in nature than what now presented itself.

After a truly glorious sunrise the day was mostly grey and mild, but sheets of ice still lingered in some sheltered roads and back at the tail of the running order we were ploughing through deep mud on most sections, as the frost that confronted early runners had melted away into mush. Section 2, Heywood Common had a major queue building up, clearly it was catching out a number of runners. It's tougher than Harton Wood to present another eye-opener for my new passenger. But with a lot of revs on the clock we cleaned it and headed off to Coates Farm for the Special Test and section 3. The test went OK and unlike last year I didn't need two goes at hooking reverse, which was a good thing as it mattered in the final results.

The Coates Wood section was also causing major delays up ahead. We had plenty of opportunity to watch car after car struggle up the seemingly innocuous first stretch, which climbed quite gently up the edge of a field before turning sharp left at the top and disappearing into the trees. The melted frost had made the grassy surface extremely slippery. Up ahead of us, class rival Nick Deacon made one of the few successful climbs, so the benchmark was set. The wait dragged on, and the nerves jangled a bit, it must be admitted. On the lowest tyre pressures I risk, the Monkey dug in quite well early on and we got some speed up, passing the assembled photographers at the halfway point, and just kept on going and going! We reached the woods and after a few close encounters with trees and a lot of steering with the throttle more than the front wheels, popped out at the top into a winter wonderland of frost-covered trees. Graham was getting more accustomed to the whole thing and really enjoyed this section although he said the drop and the trees on his side of the car all looked worryingly close at times!

Clean so far... but we ground to a halt at the 3 marker on the following Easthope section with was muddier than I have seen on previous events. The recovery process here wasn't entirely how I would have organised it (but then it's always different from the competitor's viewpoint) and we got dragged into a tree which left the door with a hefty dent and making a dreadful CLUNK when opened. Then on the following section, Ippikins Rock I made a silly error and assuming we would slither wide on the very tight hairpin and climb the bank on the exit (as has happened before...) I turned in a little too early and got beached on the inside verge. That was 6 easy points thrown away.

Jenny Wind is a section I have seldom made much progress on so to get as high as 5 was quite satisfying, although class rivals Dave Slade and Nick Deacon bagged 4 and 3 respectively. Reversing back down was rather hairy however, the throttle stuck open leaving us reliant on the hand brake for any retardation on a very steep and slippery surface. The following Harley Bank was an easy clean although we had to slow to a crawl at the top due to dog walkers in the road.

Then it was the fairly long road section out to Hungerford Steps, with the mud clogging one front wheel throwing it well out of balance. There we encountered the usual long queue on the roadside as the various classes, which had diverged on previous sections, now came back together. Much socialising was done as we waited, not entirely to the approval of the chief Marshall who wasn't keen on us all wandering about it seemed. I love Hungerford Steps. It's the best section on the event, even if it doesn't take many scalps (five on this occasion) it's very satisfying to get through and fairly nerve wracking as the ruts get ever deeper in the final stages and the momentum ebbs away just as you really need it. Graham declared it 'exhausting'. It is. With just two sections left I figured we were probably running 3rd in class at best.

Abdon Liberty was very rough and muddy in the lower part opening up onto slick grass and I think we replicated last year's 7, which looking at the results was more or less par for the course. Lots of photographers on the banks here with a nice view down across the valley as a backdrop. And so, to the final section at Flounders Folly which I made a complete mess of last year (12...). Another long queue the light was fading by the time we got off the line. And we very, very nearly didn't get much further. That initial little uphill left on slick clay really is tricky and a lot of throttle work and some bouncing just got us up over the top enough to pick up a little speed. Scoring 5 wasn't great (Dave Slade made it to 3) but it was a lot further then I have managed there before so ended the day satisfactorily.

And we did indeed finish 3rd, although as mentioned, only due to a faster time on the test than Keith Dobinson. Graham enjoyed the entire experience even if it was "a lot more hardcore than I was expecting" and hopefully a

report will appear in the MAC News, of which he is the editor. Off the back of two miserable retirements, on the Edinburgh & the Exeter, this year's Clee Hills was first and foremost about finishing in once piece. The Gas Monkey X-90 had taken up so much time over the previous three months with little to show in return that it was reaching the one-last-chance stage. Thank goodness it proved to be a good solid run and not even a flat tyre to change. The dents will knock out...more or less!